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DOCUMENTS

LETTERS OF GEORGE WASHINGTON BEARING ON THE NEGRO

In bringing together here the important expressions of George Washington reflecting his attitude toward the Negro, no claim to the discovery of something new is made. Our aim is rather to publish these extracts in succinct form for the convenience of those who may be interested in this field. While it is to be regretted that we have not here a large collection of such materials, these are adequate to give one a better conception of what Washington thought about the Negro than can be usually obtained from secondary works.

Complying with the custom of transporting troublesome blacks to the West Indies,¹ Washington addressed Captain John Thompson the following July 2, 1766:

“*Sir*:

“With this letter comes a Negro (Tom), which I beg the favour of you to sell, in any of the Islands you may go to, for whatever he will fetch and bring me in return for him.

“One hhd of best molasses

One ditto of best rum

One barrell of lymes if good and cheap

One pot of tamarinds containing about 10 lbs.

Two small ditto of mixed sweetmeats about 5 lbs. each.

“And the residue, much or little, in good old spirits. That this fellow is both a rogue and a runaway (tho’ he was by no means remarkable for the former, and never practiced the latter till of late) I shall not pretend to deny—But he is exceeding healthy, strong, and good at the hoe the whole neighbourhood can testife and particularly M. Johnson and his son, who have both had him under them as foreman of the gang; which gives me reason to hope

¹ *Boston Evening Post*, Aug. 3, 1761. This issue carries an advertisement for such Negroes.

he may, with your good management, sell well, if kept clean and trim'd up a little when offered for sale.

"I shall cherfully allow you the customary commissions on this affair, and must beg the favour of you (least he should attempt his escape) to keep him handcuffd till you get to sea—or in the bay—after which I doubt not but you may make him very useful to you.

"I wish you a pleasant and prosperous passage, and a safe and speedy return, being Sir

"Y^r Very H^{ble}. Serv^t.

"G^o. WASHINGTON." ^{1a}

The question as to whether Washington wanted Negroes in the army has often been raised. Addressing a Committee of Congress January 28, 1778, Washington said in part:

"Gentlemen,

"The difficulty of getting waggoners and the enormous wages given them would tempt one to try any expedient to answer the end of easier and cheaper terms. Among others it has occurred to me whether it would not be eligible to hire negroes in Carolina, Virginia and Maryland for the purpose. They ought however to be freemen, for slaves could not be sufficiently depended on. It is to be apprehended they would too frequently desert to the enemy to obtain their liberty, and for the profit of it, or to conciliate a more favorable reception would carry off their wagon horses with them." ²

The student finds it difficult to determine exactly what was Washington's attitude toward the enlistment of Negro soldiers. When that question was extensively agitated Laurens wrote Washington:

"Had we arms for three thousand such black men as I could select in Carolina, I should have no doubt of success in driving the British out of Georgia, and subduing East Florida before the end of July."

To this Washington replied:

"The policy of our arming slaves is in my opinion a moot point,

^{1a} Ford, "Washington's Writing," II, 211.

² *Ibid.*, VI, 349.

unless the enemy set the example. For, should we begin to form Battalions of them, I have not the smallest doubt, if the war is to be prosecuted, of their following us in it, and justifying the measure upon our own ground. The contest then must be who can arm fastest, and where are our arms? Besides I am not clear that a discrimination will not render slavery more irksome to those who remain in it. Most of the good and evil things in this life are judged by comparison; and I fear a comparison in this case will be productive of much discontent in those, who are held in servitude. But, as this is a subject that has never employed much of my thoughts, these are no more than the first crude Ideas that have struck me upon ye occasion.”³

Writing to Lieutenant Colonel John Laurens, July 10, 1782, concerning his plan to arm Negroes to defend the South, he said:

“My Dear Sir:

“The last post brought me your letter of the 19th of May. I must confess that I am not at all astonished at the failure of your plan. That spirit of freedom, which at the commencement of this contest would have gladly sacrificed every thing to the attainment of its object, has long since subsided, and every selfish passion has taken its place. It is not the public but private interest, which influences the generality of mankind, nor can the Americans any longer boast an exception. Under these circumstances, it would rather have been surprising if you had succeeded nor will you I fear succeed better in Georgia.”⁴

From his headquarters October 24, 1781, Washington wrote David Ross the following concerning Negroes who had been recaptured during the Revolutionary War:

“Sir:

“In answer to your Queries of Yesterday, the Negroes that have been retaken, from whatever State, whose owners do not appear, should all be treated in the same manner, and sent into the Country to work for their Victuals and Cloathes, and advertised in the States they came from. Those from N. York, are most probably the property of Inhabitants of that State and N. Jersey, and should

³ Ford, “Washington’s Writings,” VII, 371.

⁴ *Ibid.*, X, 48.

be there Advertised. If any officers, knowing who the owners are, will undertake to send them home, they may be delivered to them. The other steps taken by you, are proper and Expedient. The Negroes may be furnished with two days' Provisions to carry them to Williamsburg, where there is a State Commissary.

"I am etc.," ⁵

In a letter to Colonel Bland in 1783 Washington took up one of the important questions arising at the close of the Revolution. This was the return of the slaves carried off by the British:

"*Sir,*

"HEAD QUARTERS 31st March, 1783.

"The Article in the provisional Treaty respecting Negroes, which you mention to Sir Guy Carleton, had escaped my Notice, but upon a recurrence to the Treaty, I find it as you have stated. I have therefore tho't it may not be amiss to send in your Letter to Sir Guy, and have accordingly done it.

"Altho I have Servants in like predicament with yours, I have not yet made any attempt for their recovery.

"Sir Guy Carleton's reply to you will decide upon the propriety or expediency of any pursuit to obtain them. If that reply should not be transmitted thro my Hands, I will thank you for a Communication of it.

"With much Regard, I am &c." ⁶

Writing to Sir Guy Carleton about the same question on May 6, 1783, Washington said:

"Respecting the other point of discussion, in addition to what I mentioned in my communication of the 21st ultimo, I took occasion in our conference to inform your Excellency, that, in consequence of your letter of the 14th of April to Robert R. Livingston, Esquire, Congress had been pleased to make a further reference to me of that letter, and had directed me to take such measures as should be found necessary for carrying into effect the several matters mentioned by you therein.⁷ In the course of our conversa-

⁵ Ford, "Washington's Writings," IX, 392-393.

⁶ *Ibid.*, X, 200.

⁷ In the letter here mentioned, Sir Guy Carleton had requested that Congress would empower some person or persons to go into New York, and assist such persons as he should appoint to inspect and superintend the embarkation

tion on this point, I was surprised to hear you mention, that an embarkation had already taken place, in which a large number of negroes had been carried away. Whether this conduct is, consonant to, or how far it may be deemed an infraction of the treaty, is not for me to decide. I cannot, however, conceal from you, that my private opinion is, that the measure is totally different from the letter and spirit of the treaty. But, waving the discussion of the point, and leaving its decision to our respective sovereigns, I find it my duty to signify my readiness, in conjunction with your Excellency, to enter into any agreement, or to take any measures, which may be deemed expedient, to prevent the future carrying away of any negroes, or other property of the American inhabitants. I beg the favor of your Excellency's reply, and have the honor to be, &c." ⁸

In the substance of the conference between Gen. Washington and Sir Guy Carleton, at an interview at Orangetown, 6th May, 1783, one gets a still better idea of the attitude of Washington on this question:

"General Washington opened the Conference by observing that he heretofore had transmitted to Sir Guy Carleton the resolutions of Congress of the 15th ulto, that he conceived a personal Conference would be the most speedy & satisfactory mode of discussing and settling the Business; and that therefore he had re-

of persons and property, in fulfilment of the seventh article of the provisional treaty, and "that they would be pleased to represent to him every infraction of the letter of spirit of the treaty, that redress might be immediately ordered."—*Diplomatic Correspondence*, Vol. XI, p. 335. The commissioners appointed by General Washington for this purpose were Egbert Benson, William S. Smith, and Daniel Parker. Their instructions were dated the 8th of May.

⁸ This gives further light on the subject: "The breach of that (article) which stipulated a restoration of negroes, will be made the subject of a pointed remonstrance from our minister in Europe to the British Court, with a demand of reparation; and in the meantime Genl. Washington is to insist on a more faithful observance of that stipulation at New York."—*Virginia Delegates in Congress to the Governor of Virginia*, 27 May, 1783.

"Some of my own slaves, and those of Mr. Lund Washington who lives at my house, may probably be in New York, but I am unable to give you their description—their names being so easily changed, will be fruitless to give. If by chance you should come at the knowledge of any of them, I will be much obliged by your securing them, so that I am obtain them again."—*Washington to Daniel Parker*, 28 April, 1783. Ford, "Washington's Writings," X, 246–247.

quested the Interview—That the resolutions of Congress related to three distinct matters, namely, the setting at Liberty the prisoners, the receiving possession of the posts occupied by the British Troops, and the obtaining the Delivery of all Negroes & other property of the Inhabitants of these States in the possession of the Forces or subjects of, or adherents to his Britannic Majesty.—That with respect to the Liberation of the prisoners, he had, as far as the Business rested with him, put it in Train, by meetg. & conferring with the Secretary of War, & concertg. with him the proper measures for collecting prisoners & forwarding them to N. York, and that it was to be optional with Sir Guy, whether the prisoners should march by land, or whether he would send Transports to convey them by Water—and that the Secty. of War was to communicate with Sir Guy Carleton on the subject & obtain his Determination.

“With respect to the other two Matters which were the Objects of the Resolutions, General Washington requested the Sentiments of General Carleton.

“Sir: Guy then observed that his Expectations of a peace had been such that he had anticipated the Event by very early commencing his preparations to withdraw the British Troops from this Country—and that every preparation which his situation & circumstances would permit was still continued—That an additional Number of Transports, and which were expected, were necessary to remove the Troops & Stores—and as it was impossible to ascertain the Time when the Transports would arrive, their passage depending on the casualties of the Seas, he was there unable to fix a determinate period within which the British forces would be withdrawn from the City of New York—But that it was his desire to exceed even our own Wishes in this Respect, & That he was using every means in his power to effect with all possible despatch an Evacuation of that & every other post within the United States, occupied by the British Troops, under his Direction—That he considered as included in the preparations for the final Departure of the B. Troops, the previously sending away those persons, who supposed that, from the part they had taken in the present War, it would be most eligible for them to leave the Country—and that upwards of 6,000 persons of this Character had embarked & sailed—and that in this Embarkation a Number of Negroes were comprised—General Washington therefore express his Surprize, that after what appeared to him an express Stipulation to the contrary

in the Treaty, Negroes the property of the Inhabitants of these States should be sent off.

“To which Sir: Guy Carleton replied, that he wished to be considered as giving no construction of the Treaty—That by Property in the Treaty might only be intended Property at the Time, the Negroes were sent off—That there was a difference in the Mode of Expression in the Treaty; Archives, Papers, &c., &c., were to be restored—Negroes & other property were only not to be destroyed or carried away. But he principally insisted that he conceived it could not have been the Intention of the B. Government by the Treaty of Peace, to reduce themselves to the necessity of violating their faith to the Negroes who came into the British Lines under the proclamation of his Predecessors in Command—That he forebore to express his sentiments on the propriety of those proclamations, but that delivering up the Negroes to their former Masters would be delivering then up some possible to Execution, and others to severe punishments, which in his Opinion would be a dishonorable violation of the public Faith, pledged to the Negroes in the proclamations—That if the sending off the Negroes should hereafter be declared in Infraction of the Treaty, Compensation must be made by the Crown of G. Britain to the Owners—that he had taken measures to provide for this, by directing a Register to be kept of all the Negroes who were sent off, specifying the Name, Age & Occupation of the person, and the Name, & Place of Residence of his former Master. Genl. Washington again observed that he conceived this Conduct on the part of Genl. Carleton, a Departure from both the Letter and Spirit of the Articles of Peace;—and particularly mentioned a difficulty that would arise in compensating the proprietors of Negroes, admitting this infraction of the Treaty can be satisfied by such a compensation as Sir Guy had alluded to, as it was impossible to ascertain the Value of the Slaves from any Fact or Circumstance which may appear in the Register,—the Value of a Slave consisting chiefly in his Industry and Sobriety—& Genl. Washington mentioned a further Difficulty which would attend Identifying the Slave, supposing him to have changed his own and to have given a wrong Name of his Master—In answer to which Sir Guy Carleton said, that as the Negroe was free & secured against his Master, he could have no inducement to conceal his own true Name or that of His Master—Sir Guy Carleton then observed that by the Treaty he was not held to deliver up any property but was only restricted

from carrying it way—and therefore admitting the interpretation of the Treaty as given by Genl. Washington to be just, he was notwithstanding pursuing a Measure which would operate most for the security of the proprietors. For if the Negroes were left to themselves without Care of Controul from him, numbers of them would very probably go off, and not return to the parts of the Country from whence they came, or clandestinely get on Board the Transports in such a manner as would not be in his Power to prevent—in either of which Cases an inevitable Loss would ensue to the proprietors—But as the Business was now conducted they had at least a Chance for Compensation—Sir Guy concluded the Conversation on this subject by saying that he Imagined that the mode of Compensating as well as the Amount and other points with respect to which there was no provision made in the Treaty, must be adjusted by the Commissioners to be hereafter appointed by the two Nations.”⁹

Washington admitted that slavery was wrong but he never did much to curb its growing power, contenting himself with a deprecation much like this expressed in the letter to Lafayette, April 5, 1783.

“The scheme, my dear Marqs., which you propose as a precedent to encourage the emancipation of the black people of this Country from that state of Bondage in wch. they are held, is a striking evidence of the benevolence of your Heart. I shall be happy to join in so laudable a work; but will defer going into a detail of the business, till I have had the pleasure of seeing you.”¹⁰

In 1786 Washington wrote the Marquis:

“The benevolence of your heart, my dear Marquis, is so conspicuous on all occasions, that I never wonder at any fresh proofs of it; but your late purchase of an estate in the colony of Cayenne, with a view of emancipating the slaves on it, is a generous and noble proof of your humanity. Would to God a like spirit might diffuse itself generally, into the minds of the people of this country. But I despair of seeing it. Some petitions were presented to the Assembly at its last session, for the abolition of slavery, but they could scarcely obtain a reading. To set the slave afloat at once would, I really believe, be productive of much inconvenience and

⁹ Ford, “Washington’s Writings,” X, 241–243.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, X, 220.

mischief, but by degrees it certainly might and assuredly ought to be effected; and that too by legislative authority.”^{10a}

Addressing Robert Morris in 1786, Washington said:

“I hope that it will not be conceived, from these observations, that it is my wish to hold the unhappy people who are the subject of this letter, in slavery. I can only say that there is not a man living who wishes more sincerely than I do, to see a plan adopted for the abolition of it; but there is only one proper and effectual mode by which it can be accomplished, and that is by legislative authority; and this, as far as my suffrage will go, shall never be wanting.”^{10a}

Although not an active abolitionist Washington did not believe in the slave traffic, as this part of his letter to John Mercer in 1786 will show:

“I never mean, unless some particular circumstance should compel me to it, to possess another slave by purchase, it being among my first wishes to see some plan adopted, by which slavery in the country may be abolished by law.”^{10a}

In 1799 he wrote Robert Lewis:

“It is demonstratively clear, that on this Estate (Mount Vernon) I have more working negroes by a full moiety, than can be employed to any advantage in the farming system, and I shall never turn Planter thereon.

“To sell the overplus I cannot, because I am principled against this kind of traffic in the human species. To hire them out, is almost as bad, because they could not be disposed of in families to any advantage, and to disperse the families I have an aversion. What then is to be done? Something must or I shall be ruined; for all the money (in addition to what I raise by crops, and rents) that have been received for Lands, sold within the last four years, to the amount of Fifty thousand dollars, has scarcely been able to keep me afloat.

“Under these circumstances and a thorough conviction that half the workers I keep on this Estate would render me a greater nett profit than I now derive from the whole, has made me resolve if it can be accomplished, to settle Plantations on some of my other

^{10a} *The Philanthropist*, March 4, 1836.

Lands. But where? without going to the Western Country, I am unable, as yet to decide; as the best, if not all the Land I have on the East side of the Aleghanies are under Leases, or some kind of incumbrance or another. But as you can give me the correct information relative to this matter, I now early apply for it." ¹¹

The best evidence as to what Washington thought of the Negro may be obtained from his treatment of his slaves, as brought out by the following clauses from his will.

"*Item*—Upon the decease of my wife it is my will and desire, that all the slaves which I hold in *my own right* shall receive their freedom—To emancipate them during her life, would tho earnestly wished by me, be attended with such insuperable difficulties, on account of their intermixture by marriages with the Dower negroes as to excite the most painful sensations—if not disagreeable consequences from the latter while both descriptions are in the occupancy of the same proprietor, it not being in my power under tenure by which the dower Negroes are held to manumit them—And whereas among those who will receive freedom according to this devise there may be some who from old age, or bodily infirmities & others who on account of their infancy, that will be unable to support themselves, it is my will and desire that all who come under the first and second description shall be comfortably clothed and fed by my heirs while they live and (3) that such of the latter description as have no parents living, or if living are unable, or unwilling to provide for them, shall be bound by the Court until they shall arrive at the age of twenty five years, and in cases where no record can be produced whereby their ages can be ascertained, the Judgment of the Court upon it's own view of the subject shall be adequate and final—The negroes thus bound are (by their masters and mistresses) to be taught to read and write and to be brought up to some useful occupation, agreeable to the laws of the commonwealth of Virginia, providing for the support of orphans and other poor children—and I do hereby expressly forbid the sale or transportation out of the said Commonwealth of any Slave I may die possessed of, under any pretence, whatsoever—and I do moreover most positively, and solemnly enjoin it upon my Executors hereafter named, or the survivors of them to see that this clause respecting slaves and every part thereof be religiously fulfilled at the Epoch at which it is directed to take place without evasion

¹¹ Ford, "Washington's Writings," XIV, 196–197.

neglect or delay after the crops which may then be on the ground are harvested, particularly as it respects (4) the aged and infirm, seeing that a regular and permanent fund be established for their support so long as there are subjects requiring it, not trusting to the uncertain provisions to be made by individuals.—And to my mulatto man, William (calling himself William Lee) I give immediate freedom or if he should prefer it (on account of the accidents which have befallen him and which have rendered him incapable of walking or of any active employment) ¹² to remain in the situation he now is, it shall be optional in him to do so—In either case however I allow him an annuity of thirty dollars during his natural life which shall be independent of the victuals and cloaths he has been accustomed to receive; if he chuses the last alternative, but in full with his freedom, if he prefers the first, and this I give him as a testimony of my sense of his attachment to me and for his services during the Revolutionary War.¹³

¹² “On 22d April 1785, when acting as chain bearer, while Washington was surveying a tract of land on Four Mile Run, William fell, and broke his knee pan; ‘which put a stop to my surveying; and with much difficulty I was able to get him to abingdon, being obliged to get a sled to carry him on, as he could neither walk, stand or ride.’”—*Washington's Diary*. See *Spurious Letters Attributed to Washington*, 8.

¹³ “The mulatto fellow, William, who has been with me all the war, is attached (married he says) to one of his own color, a free woman, who during the war, was also of my family. She has been in an infirm condition for some time, and I had conceived that the connexion between them had ceased; but I am mistaken it seems; they are both applying to get her here, and tho’ I never wished to see her more, I cannot refuse his request (if it can be complied with on reasonable terms) as he has served me faithfully for many years.

“After premising this much, I have to beg the favor to procure her passage to Alexandria, either by Sea, in the Stage, or in the passage of boat from the head of the Elk, as you shall think cheapest and best, and her situation will admit; the cost of either I will pay. Her name is Margaret Thomas allias Lee (the name by which *he* calls himself). She lives in Philada. with Isaac and Hannah Sile—black people, who are oftren employ’d by families in the city as cooks.”—*Washington to Clement Biddle*, 28 July, 1784.

“The President would thank you to propose to Will to return to Mount Vernon when he can be removed for he cannot be of any service here, and perhaps will require a person to attend upon him constantly. If he should be incline to return to Mount Vernon, you will be so kind as to have him sent in the first Vessel that sails for Alexandria after he can be removed with safety—but if he is still anxious to come on here the President would gratify him Altho’ he will be troublesome—He has been an old faithful Servant, this is enough for the President to gratify him in every reasonable wish.”—*Lear to Biddle*, 3 March, 1789. Ford, “*Washington's Writings*,” XIV, 272–274.

“*Item*—The balance due to me from the Estate of Bartholomew Dandridge deceased, (my wife’s brother) and which amounted on the first day of October, 1795, to Four hundred and twenty-five pounds (as will appear by an account rendered by his deceased son John Dandridge, who was the Executor of his father’s will) I release and acquit from the payment thereof,—And the *negros* (then thirty three in number) formerly belonging to the said Estate who were taken in Execution,—sold—and purchased in, on my account in the year (1795 ?) and ever since have remained in the possession and to the use of Mary, widow of the said Bartholomew Dandridge with their increase, it is my will and desire shall continue and be in her possession, without paying hire or making (13) compensation for the same for the time past or to come during her natural life, at the expiration of which, I direct that all of them who are forty years old and upwards shall receive their freedom, all under that age and above sixteen shall serve seven years and no longer, and all under sixteen years shall serve until they are twenty-five years of age and then be free.—And to avoid disputes respecting the ages of any of these *negros* they are to be taken to the Court of the County in which they reside and the judgment thereof in this relation shall be final and a record thereof made, which may be adduced as evidence at any time thereafter if disputes should arise concerning the same.—And I further direct that the heirs of the said Bartholomew Dandridge shall equally share the benefits arising from the services of the said *negros* according to the tenor of this devise upon the decease of their mother.”